

The sandwich generation

by Cara Williams

This article is an adaptation of "The sandwich generation," *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-001-XIE, vol. 5, no. 9), available at www.statcan.ca/8096/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=75-001-X20041097033.

Balancing home and work, particularly when young children and a full-time job are in the picture, can be challenging for the best of us. It is easy to see why: eight hours at the office, plus commuting, arranging children's activities, helping with homework, preparing meals, doing household chores and planning for family time makes balance seem more like an elusive goal than a firm reality. For some, the task becomes even more difficult when they must provide care to aging parents or other relatives. These people make up the sandwich generation, whose members are caught between the often conflicting demands of caring for children and caring for seniors.

While today's sandwich generation is relatively small, it is likely to grow substantially as baby boomers age. Because of their sheer numbers, when boomers become seniors, they will account for a much larger proportion of the population than do the elderly today. In fact, population projections indicate that by 2026, one in five Canadians will be 65 or older, up from one in eight in 2001.

Another factor associated with a growing sandwich generation involves lower fertility rates, which may translate into fewer adults available to care for the elderly. Finally, because today's young adults

frequently delay marriage and parenthood, it is not unusual for older family members to require care at a time when young children and teens are still part of the household. Indeed, delayed marriage, postponement of children, and decreased fertility rates, coupled with increased life expectancy, mean that the average married couple may have more living parents than children.¹

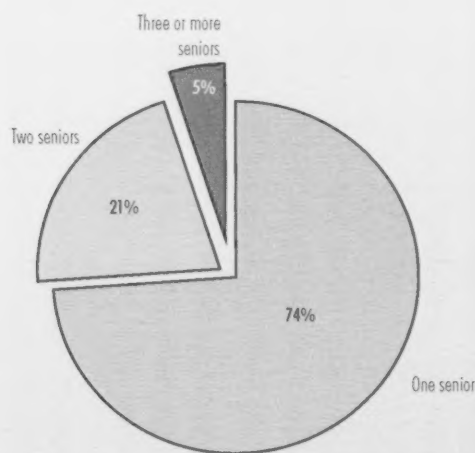
The personal and financial sacrifices made by members of the sandwich generation have been highlighted in the media.² At the same time, however, some analysts have argued that because the sandwich generation is small, the negative consequences of belonging to this group are overstated.³ Yet others think that most care of seniors by family members is better defined as "helping" and that intensive caregiving is very limited.⁴ To date, however, little empirical data exist for Canada. This article uses the 2002 General Social Survey (GSS) to examine care of the elderly by persons aged 45 to 64 with children still at home. The analysis focuses on the types of care given, the time spent on these activities, the effects on the individual from both a work and a personal perspective, and the resources that could benefit caregivers.

Balancing care of children and seniors is not a new phenomenon

Providing care to elderly relatives is not new and, until quite recently, families played a pivotal role in this regard.⁵ In the past, it was not unusual to find three generations in one household, with the primary caregiving done by the middle-aged woman in the home. While some striking similarities exist between past and present caregiving, one crucial difference is evident: Today, the majority of working-age, non-senior women engage in paid work and are not full-time homemakers. However, while parents have seen childcare services evolve, little formal support has been established for the growing number of middle-aged men and women caring for seniors.

So how are families coping? Research has shown that women do more child care and housework, while men spend longer hours at paid work. But what happens when elder care enters the mix? Are women more likely to be on call or is the responsibility shared?

According to the 2002 GSS, about 2.6 million people between 45 and 64 had children under 25 living with them. Approximately 27%—or 712,000—also performed some type of elder care. These individuals make up the sandwich generation. While



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2002.

the vast majority provided elder care for their parents or parents-in-law, about 25% cared for other relatives, friends, neighbours or co-workers.

Some sandwiches are thinly spread

Caring for both children and elderly relatives can be stressful, particularly for those with young or multiple children.⁶ If, in addition, more than one elderly person needs to be looked after, the situation may become even more complicated. Indeed, about 21% of sandwiched workers cared for two seniors and another 5% for at least three.

The vast majority (more than 8 in 10) of those who provided care for their children as well as a senior stated that their main activity in the last 12 months had been paid work. In comparison, only 65% of individuals who cared for an elderly person but who had no children were employed. Balancing work and family

can be tough. Interestingly, however, according to the 2002 GSS, most people (82%) who worked while providing both child care and elder care were generally satisfied with the balance they had struck.

Nonetheless, caring for both children and seniors does sometimes necessitate life adjustments, such as a change in work hours, refusal of a job offer, or a reduction in income. About one in seven sandwiched workers had reduced their work hours over the previous 12 months, 20% shifted their work hours, and 10% lost income.

Sandwiched workers have been portrayed as unable to meet their other responsibilities because of caring for a senior.⁷ However, results of the GSS show that only slightly more than 1 in 10 workers aged 45 to 64 who were caring for an elderly person, either with or without children at home, had difficulty meeting their other responsibilities.

Sandwiched workers spend less time on elder care than those without children at home

The 2002 GSS looked at the number of hours respondents spent on elder-care activities such as housework and meal preparation; yardwork and outside home maintenance; driving to appointments; and helping with bathing or dressing. Although results indicate that the incidence of providing care was similar, sandwiched workers spent fewer hours on these activities than those with no children at home: an average of 20 hours per month versus 26 hours, respectively. The two groups spent a similar amount of time on their paid job—sandwiched workers 42 hours per week and workers with no children at home, 41 hours.

The number of hours spent caring for someone provides an indicator of intensity. Sandwiched workers who spend eight hours or less per month on elder care can be considered low-intensity caregivers, while those spending more are their high-intensity counterparts. Effects on the caregiver differ significantly based on these groupings. However, it is not only the amount of care that matters. While two caregivers may spend similar amounts of time helping a senior, the tasks they need to perform may differ substantially. For example, one care receiver may need help only with outside chores such as mowing the lawn, while another may require assistance with daily living, such as bathing, dressing or feeding.

Not surprisingly, caregivers in the high-intensity group were more likely to experience negative health effects. Indeed, 76% of these individuals felt stressed compared with 67% of their low-intensity counterparts. While 22% of high-intensity caregivers reported changes in their sleep patterns, only 9% of those in the low-intensity group stated similar occurrences. In addition, 23% of high-intensity individuals found their general health affected by elder care versus 7% of

	Intensity of elder care	
	Low (8 hours or less per month)	High (more than 8 hours per month)
	%	
Proportion feeling stressed		
Very/somewhat	67	76*
Not very	23	19
Not at all	9 [†]	5 [†]
Don't know/no opinion	F	F
Care giving has resulted in		
Health repercussions	7 [†]	23*
Changed sleep patterns	9 [†]	22*
Extra expenses	32	55*
Change in social activities	28	50*
Change in holidays	17	43*
Care receiver moving closer	7 [†]	10 [†]
Caregiver moving in with care receiver	F	6 [†]
Effects on work		
Work hours shifted	11	35*
Work hours reduced	10	26*
Income reduced	6 [†]	17*
Overall burden		
None	60	37*
Little/moderate	34	56*
Quite a bit/extreme	3 [†]	6 [†]

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to some non-response.

* Indicates statistically significant difference from the low-intensity sandwiched group.

[†] Use with caution

F Too unreliable to publish

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2002.

low-intensity caregivers. And, about one-half of those in the high-intensity group had to change their social activities and 43%, their holiday plans. These individuals were also much more likely than their low-intensity counterparts to feel constantly stressed: 20% versus 9%.

Caregivers in the high-intensity group were also considerably more likely to experience work-related problems. They were three times as likely to shift their work hours, and more than twice as likely to reduce them or to experience a drop in income.

Women more involved in caregiving

Women continue to shoulder much of the childcare responsibility within two-parent households, even when both parents are in the labour force.⁸ This also holds true for elder care, both in terms of the likelihood of providing care and in performing the most intensive tasks such as bathing, dressing and cooking.⁹ About 25% of 45- to 64-year-old men with children at home provided elder care compared with 32% of women in similar circumstances.

The amount of time devoted to elder care also varied between men

and women. Working women with children at home spent more than twice as many hours per month caring for an older person as their male counterparts (29 hours versus 13). This may be due in part to the type of care performed. For example, 69% of outside home maintenance and 65% of transportation assistance was done by men. Conversely, women were more likely to provide personal care (79% versus 22% of men), and in-home care such as food preparation and clean-up (65%). This pattern also held true for those who provided elder care only.

Although satisfied with life, sandwiched workers are more stressed than others

Two schools of thought have emerged with respect to the personal consequences of caring simultaneously for seniors and children. According to one, such people feel no more rushed or stressed than anyone else, since the negative aspects of caregiving are balanced by increased self-esteem.¹⁰ According to the second, the two roles may lead to overload, poor health, increased stress, and an inability to find balance in life.¹¹ In addition, many adult children have considerable emotional difficulty caring for their aging parents. As a result, the situation can be stressful for both caregiver and care receiver, especially as failing health necessitates more care.¹²

The 2002 GSS supports both schools of thought. For example, 95% of sandwiched workers reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with life in general—virtually the same proportion as those with fewer responsibilities. However, although generally satisfied, sandwiched workers were significantly more likely to feel stressed (70%) than either those who provided elder care only (64%) or those with no childcare or eldercare responsibilities (61%).

This is not surprising, given that working full time, raising children and caring for seniors often leaves little time for social activities or holidays

	Employed persons aged 45 to 64		
	Sandwiched	Elder care only	Neither
	%		
Overall health			
Excellent/very good	74	74	73
Good	22	21	21
Fair/poor	4	5	5
Stress level			
Very/somewhat	70	64*	61*
Not very	21	25	26
Not at all	7	10	10
Don't know/no opinion	F	F	F
Job, family balance			
Very satisfied	21	28*	29*
Satisfied	61	57	57
Neither/no opinion	5	5	4
Dissatisfied	11	8	8
Very dissatisfied	F	F	F
Satisfaction with life			
Very satisfied	34	32	29*
Satisfied	61	62	65
No opinion	F	F	F
Not very satisfied	3 [†]	4	3
Not at all satisfied	F	F	F

[†] Use with caution

F Too unreliable to publish

* Indicates statistically significant differences from sandwiched workers.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2002.

and may, in addition, contribute to health problems. Indeed, more than one-third of these caregivers found it necessary to curtail social activities, and a quarter had to change holiday plans. Often a call for help can come in the night and the caregiver must leave the house to provide assistance. Some 13% experienced a change in sleep patterns, and the same percentage felt their health affected in some way. While 1 in 10 sandwiched workers lost income, 4 in 10 incurred extra expenses such as renting medical equipment or purchasing cell phones.

Nonetheless, for many, caregiving has positive aspects. More than 60% of caregivers felt they were giving back some of what life had given them, and 70% reported that their relationship with the elderly person was strengthened. While caregiving can be difficult to fit in with other obligations and responsibilities, only about 5% of respondents felt it to be an extreme burden.

The caregiver's wish list

Those busy balancing children, work and elder care reported needing support in the form of workplace

programs or appropriate government policy. Workplace support includes flexible hours, telework, and information about community resources in particular, and health and aging in general.¹³ However, despite concerns that potential work absences by sandwiched caregivers would lead to higher associated costs and productivity losses, eldercare programs are less likely to be available than childcare programs—and even if offered, they are not often used.¹⁴ The 1999 Workplace and Employee Survey (which excludes public administration) found that 802,700 individuals or 7% of employees had access to childcare services but only 78,800 (just under 10%) made use of them. While fewer employees had access to elder care (394,300), the take-up rate was slightly higher at about 13%.

Researchers put forward several reasons to explain the low utilization rate of workplace eldercare services. For example, it appears that programs often do not adequately meet the needs of either the care recipients or caregivers. As well, according to some focus group research, caregivers may try to hide their caregiving responsibilities, fearing that they are career-limiting. And finally, workplace culture may not support the use of such programs even when offered.¹⁵

The caregiver's wish list was very similar for all individuals providing elder care, whether they had children at home or not. For example, both groups were equally likely to want compensation or tax breaks, information on long-term illnesses or disabilities, or counseling. However, some differences were evident. Of those working, sandwiched individuals were more likely than those caring for an elderly person only to feel they could do a better job if respite care was available (52% versus 46%). Sandwiched workers were also more likely to want flexible work or study arrangements (46% versus 36%).

	Employed	
	Sandwiched	Elder care only
	%	
Respite care	52	46*
Flexible work or study arrangements	46	36*
Information on long-term disabilities	43	39
Information on caregiving	42	37
Financial compensation or tax breaks	36	35
Counselling	28	24
Other	12	10

* Indicates statistically significant difference from sandwiched group.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2002.

Summary

In 2002, about 712,000 Canadians aged 45 to 64 were caught between the responsibilities of raising children and caring for seniors. For more than 8 in 10 of these individuals, paid work was added to the loads. These sandwiched workers found that in caring for a senior, 15% had to reduce their work hours, 20% had to change their schedules, and 10% experienced a reduction in income. Not surprisingly, these individuals also felt the burden in terms of their health and social life.

However, not all consequences of caregiving are negative. More than 60% of those working and caring for an older person while still having children at home felt that caring for

Data in this article come from the 2002 General Social Survey (GSS) on social support and aging. The target population comprises all persons aged 45 and over as of December 31, 2001 in private households in the 10 provinces. Data were collected between February and December 2002. The sample was selected from respondents to the 2001 Canadian Community Health Survey.

For this article, the population of interest was 45- to 64-year-olds caring for children and seniors simultaneously. Individuals were considered *sandwiched* if they provided elder care to someone over 65 and had single children less than 25 living at home. *Sandwiched workers* had a paid job or business as their main activity in the previous 12 months.

This article focuses on types of care given to seniors, hours spent on care, and effects on the caregiver. Caregiving in the form of emotional support is not included. Caregiving activities comprise *personal care* (assistance with bathing, toileting, care of toenails/fingernails, brushing teeth, hair care, and dressing); *care inside the home* (meal preparation and clean-up, housecleaning, laundry and sewing); *care outside the home* (house maintenance and outdoor work); and *transportation care* (shopping for groceries or other necessities, providing transportation, or doing a senior's banking or bill-paying).

Data limitations

While there are undoubtedly individuals under 45 who are sandwiched, they were not as likely as those aged 45 to 64 to be in this group.¹ According to some, younger caregivers may find elder care more burdensome because their children are younger. To determine if age of children had an effect on responses, sandwiched workers with children under 15 were examined. Results indicated that there was no difference between those with younger children and the population of interest.

Additionally, just over 10% (81,000) of sandwiched workers were not asked 'impact of caregiving' questions if the person for whom they provided care had died during the previous 12 months. Consequently, there may be some bias in the 'impact of care' responses. Finally, since only those providing elder care were asked 'impact of care' questions, it is not possible to compare them with the general 45- to 64-year-old population. Thus, the major comparison group comprised 45- to 64-year-olds who provided elder care but had no children at home. When possible, comparisons have been made with individuals not providing elder care and having no children at home.

1. Wisensale, S.K. October 1992. "Toward the 21st century: Family change and public policy." *Family Relations* 41, 4: 417-422.

a senior was simply giving back what they had received, and 70% stated that the relationship was strengthened. While these individuals were just as likely as other workers to be satisfied with their work-home balance, they were much more likely to feel generally stressed. They were also significantly more likely to wish for flexible work arrangements or respite care to enable them to be better caregivers.

Those who spent more than eight hours a month on elder care were more likely than those spending less than this amount to feel the effects. Of the high-intensity caregivers, half had to change their social activities, and about 35% had to alter their work schedule.



Cara Williams is a senior analyst with the Labour and Household Surveys Analysis Division, Statistics Canada.

1. Preston, S.H. December 1984. "Children and the elderly in the U.S." *Scientific American* 251, 6: 44-49.
2. Anderson, T. November 1999. "Taking a bite out of the sandwich generation." *USA Today* 128, 2654: 18-19; Immen, W. March 17, 2004. "Caught in the 'sandwich.'" *Globe and Mail* C1-2; Kleiman, C. April 29, 2002. "Sandwich generation needs support." *The London Free Press*. Business Section.
3. Fredriksen, K.I. and A.E. Scharlach. April 1999. "Employee family care responsibilities." *Family Relations* 48, 2: 189-196.
4. Rosenthal, C.I. and L.O. Stone. 1999. *How Much Help is Exchanged in Families? Towards an Understanding of Discrepant Research Findings*. SEDAP research paper no. 2. Program for Research on Social and Economic Dimensions of an Aging Population (SEDAP). Hamilton, Ont.: McMaster University.
5. Ward-Griffin, C. and V.W. Marshall. 2003. "Reconceptualizing the relationship between 'public' and 'private' elder care." *Journal of Aging Studies* 17: 189-208.
6. Some 73% of sandwiched workers had children under 20. Of these, 221,500 had at least one child under 16 and some 177,000 had two or more children under 18.
7. Immen, W. March 17, 2004. "Caught in the 'sandwich.'" *Globe and Mail* C1-2.
8. Silver, C. Summer 2000. "Being there: The time dual-earner couples spend with their children." *Canadian Social Trends* 57: 26-29.
9. Ward, K. and G. Spitze. December 1998. "Sandwiched marriages: The implications of child and parent relations for marital quality in midlife." *Social Forces* 77, 2: 647-666; Marks, N.F. November 1998. "Does it hurt to care? Caregiving, work-family conflict and midlife well-being." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 60, 4: 951-966.
10. Centre on Aging. n.d. *Research Snapshot on the Sandwich Generation: Caregiving and Stress*. Victoria: University of Victoria. www.coag.ubc.ca/publications/snapshots.htm.
11. Marks. 1998; Centre on Aging.
12. Miller, D.A. September 1981. "The 'sandwich' generation: Adult children of the aging." *Social Work* 419-423.
13. Wagner, D.L. 2003. *Workplace programs for family caregivers: Good business and good practice*. Monograph. San Francisco: Family Caregiver Alliance, National Center on Caregiving. www.caregiver.org.
14. *ibid.*
15. *ibid.*